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ABSTRACT

This study interviewed six preservice teachers in early childhood education at an Australian university concerning their knowledge about and attitudes toward young gifted learning disabled children. Information was sought concerning the subjects' understanding of the term "gifted learning disabled" as well as their ability to identify such children. The preservice teachers were also asked the types of strategies they would use in identifying, planning, and programming for such a child. Excerpts are provided from the interviews showing that students generally had a high level of confidence about defining the term "gifted learning disabled," felt that identification during the preschool years was difficult but possible, had already encountered children they regarded as gifted learning disabled, and stressed the importance of collaboration with colleagues and parents in program planning. Contains 20 references. (DB)

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Preservice Teachers' Attitudes and Awareness of Gifted Learning Disabled Preschoolers.

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Abstract: The literature on gifted learning disabled children predominantly focuses on identification in the primary years. It is believed that identification of children prior to this age is difficult due to the instability of results obtained from formal testing procedures. Consequently, the literature on identification of gifted learning disabled children in the preschool years is minimal. This study sought to investigate such a possibility with a group of preservice teachers completing a Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood). Early childhood philosophy is based on understanding and meeting the individual strengths, interests and needs of the child. However, does this knowledge provide the graduates with the confidence and competence in identifying and planning for gifted learning disabled preschools? This paper seeks to address such questions.

Presently the literature on gifted learning disabled children appears to focus extensively on the identification and implementation of appropriate, and preferably individualised programs (Baum, Owen & Dixon, 1991; Olenchak, 1995). The research primarily addresses the needs of primary school aged children, with the premise that identification of gifted learning disabled children prior to this age is difficult due to the instability of results obtained from formal testing procedures. Consequently, the literature on identification of gifted learning disabled children in the preschool years is minimal.

A major difficulty that appears through the literature is based on defining the term "gifted learning disabled". This primarily stems from the effort involved in defining two distinctive groups of 'at risk' children, that is, those identified as gifted and those with learning difficulties. Tannenbaum (1983) states that "the label of giftedness is supported by a large body of literature that equates it with high IQ (pg. vi). Children with learning difficulties, on the other hand, are most often identified by a discrepancy between their measured potential achieved using standardised IQ tests and their actual performance in academic tasks (Hannah & Shore, 1995).

Gifted learning disabled children are often referred to as a paradox (Buam, 1990). One cannot help but question, "How can a child be gifted and yet have a learning disability?" Tannenbaum (1983) has labelled these children as 'paradoxical learners' a term which fits them quite well; the harder the task, the better they do; it's the easy work they can't master" (Silverman, 1994, pg. 9).

However, not all advocates for the gifted learning disabled child see this to be the case. On the contrary, Feiring & Taft (1985) contend that "giftedness is not an all-or-none phenomenon". Children may have strengths and weaknesses depending on which skill or which domain of skills is examined" (pg. 730). It would therefore be quite probable that gifted children may have an area of 'weakness'. If this is the case, should this weakness be seen to be a disability? The question often asked is "Are we dealing with underachievers, that is, children who are lazy and *will not do the work* **or** gifted learning disabled children *who cannot do the work*?" Silverman (1994) would

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argue that these are indeed gifted children but their specific disabilities come about as a result of close examination of discrepancies which become evident during testing procedures.

Gifted learning disabled children are generally classified into three categories: (a) identified gifted students who have subtle learning disabilities; (b) unidentified students whose gifts and disabilities may be masked by average achievement and (c) identified learning disabled students who are also gifted (Baum, 1989; Baum, Owen & Dixon, 1993; Toll, 1993).

The difficulties associated with the identification of gifted learning disabled children are well documented in the literature. Van Tassel-Baska (1992) notes that "because of the variety of the characteristics that may manifest this dual exceptionality, multiple assessment measures are required" (pg. 263). The identification of gifted and learning disabled children appears to focus on two distinct identification processes: formal testing and observational analysis (Baum, Owen & Dixon, 1993; Keenan, 1994; Luport, 1990).

The collecting and analysing test data and interview information about students is referred to by Baum, Owen & Dixon (1993) as a "priori identification". The WISC - R is the test most widely employed with learning disabled children and is used with school aged children. There is however, a Wechsler test designed to be used with preschool children, called the WIPPSI (Keenan, 1994). The priori information is usually used to ascertain a potential for gifted behaviour.

One needs to be cautious when interpreting the WISC - R as accurate results can only be made after one has analysed the subtest categories. It is for this reason that Baum, Owen & Dixon (1993) recommend that a structured interview be utilised in the assessment process. The structured interview is used to gather information about task commitment, interests and creativity. This interview is conducted with adults who are familiar with the child, such as his/her parents.

Once this process is completed, the gathering of dynamic information is then recommended. Baum, Owen & Dixon (1993) emphasise that if we are to understand as "completely as possible the specific talents and areas in which these children are most comfortable, thinking and communicating dynamic information is especially useful" (pg. 64). Dynamic information is based on the theories of Tannenbaum (1983) and Renzulli (1978) who assert that to identify potential for giftedness in students we must expose them to and instruct them in particular domains. Then we must assess their ability, interests, creativity and commitment to the specific field area of human endeavor (Baum, Owen & Dixon, 1993, pg. 64). This process utilises the teacher's knowledge of the child through observations of student behaviours within the learning environment.

It is essential that identification of gifted learning disabled children is made as early as possible, and preferably in the early childhood years. Silverman (n.k.) maintains that it is possible to identify gifted children in the preschool years. She continues to state that "ironically, school districts tend to wait until third grade to identify gifted children, on the grounds that IQ scores for younger children are "unstable" (pg. 2). However,

Baum, Owen & Dixon (1993) would purport that identification begins when parents or teachers suspect that a student is having problems coping with every day school tasks.

The major constraint facing parents of gifted learning disabled children appears to be the lack of knowledge exhibited by professionals within the field of education. Parents express the view that "many teachers are not prepared to take anything you say seriously and have a tendency to label the children as being stupid or lazy (Sherwood, 1995, pg. 6). Thus many parents are left feeling helpless with nowhere to turn. Why are such comments and attitudes being held by teachers? Is this the result of a lack of knowledge on the part of the teachers or is this condition so new that accurate knowledge has not as yet been gained?

As a Lecturer at a university in Sydney, I chose to address these questions with a group of student teachers who have also just completed an elective subject , Catering for Young Children with Special Needs. These students are in their final semester of a Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood). It is highly likely that they will encounter gifted learning disabled children throughout their career. It is also possible that they may have encountered such children during their practicum experience. What is their knowledge of gifted learning disabled children? Would they feel confident in identifying a gifted learning disabled child still in the preschool years? What strategies might they use in doing so? This research has emerged as a result of such questions.

Methodology

Subjects:

The participants in this study were six preservice teachers who were completing their final year of a Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood) at a University in a metropolitan area of Sydney. Each student has also recently completed an elective subject which focused on catering for young children with special needs.

Survey Design and Procedures:

Data was collected through face-to-face interviews conducted by the researcher. Interview schedules were designed to specifically address the level of knowledge of the subjects with reference to gifted learning disabled children. Information was sought on the subjects' understanding of the term 'gifted learning disabled' children as well as their ability in identifying such children. The preservice teachers were asked to comment on the type of strategies they could use in identifying a gifted learning disabled child as well as articulate the focus they would adapt when planning and programming for such a child.

Data Analysis:

Qualitative methods were utilised to code written comments. These were analysed in the following steps:

1) recurrent words or phrases were identified;
2) responses were coded within these key identifiers.

Results

The interviews revealed a surprisingly high level of confidence among the students with reference to their ability in articulating an understanding of the term gifted learning disabled children. Some of the students appeared to take what could be classed as a 'problem solving' strategy by looking at the separate components of the term, that is, 'gifted' and 'learning disabled', and then attempting to reach an understanding of the overall concept. For example, Julie expressed her understanding as "someone who has been labeled as learning disabled but also is displaying gifted characteristics".

Connie stated:

> "I think it would be someone who has a lot of skills but can't use them for whatever reason. [Children] who don't seem to develop as well as they could".

Carolyn attempted to be more specific:

> "A child who has the potential to excel in a particular area but also has an attention deficit disorder".

However, not all the respondents felt confident in articulating their understanding of the term 'gifted learning disabled children'. Shannan expressed that "it [the term, gifted learning disabled children] sounds a bit contradictory really; you wonder if it is really possible. If someone is learning disabled how can they be gifted?" These sentiments held by Shannan are not new and dare I add that they may even be reflective of opinions held by many educationalists in the field of early childhood.

The student teachers were also questioned about the possibility of a child being gifted as well as learning disabled. To this, all but one student replied 'yes', they did feel this was possible and then each proceeded to share narratives of children they have met on practicums who, on reflection, could be classified as gifted learning disabled. Shannan, was however hesitant.

> "No; I don't really know. I would automatically say 'no', [but] maybe in some instances and depending on the severity [of the disability], it probably would be possible, if you thought about it that way". By 'that way' Shannan was referring to " a child with ADD. That really is a learning difficulty, but there are children with ADD who are gifted".

One of the most significant questions asked the students if they thought it was possible to identify a gifted learning disabled child in the preschool years. All the students felt that identification during these early years would be difficult, but it would still be possible. Reasons expressed for this difficulty focused on the 'how' of identification. Carolyn stated that ease of identification "would depend on the environment and the people you are working with because a child's behaviour may differ in different environments".

Suzanne also raised a very realistic observation;

> "They [the child] may have a severe condition which may be overriding their giftedness at that early age. It would be hard to see their giftedness".

Each of the students was able to share narratives of children they had met and in some instances worked with, who, though not identified as gifted learning disabled, seemed to them to exhibit characteristics that could be associated with children who are gifted but may have a learning disability. Interestingly, of all the children cited, only one was female. I would acknowledge that this sample is small and therefore this ratio could not be generalised, however, future studies may be able to investigate this and see whether or not there are any significant links between this condition and the gender of the child.

The importance of identification of gifted children with learning disabilities was also addressed. The students were asked to comment on the type of strategies they might use in identifying a gifted learning disabled preschool child. The most common answer was through observation of the child in a play-based environment.

> "I would start through observing and identifying a gifted learning disabled preschooler through their play, through their interactions with other children, other staff" (Carolyn).

> "The first strategy I would use would be to observe a child over a long period of time. Not just by using checklists, but during a child's play, in different situations and at different times of the day" (Genelle).

> "I think within play. I think it comes down to your observations to start of with" (Connie).

Shannan, however, felt that her first strategy would be to "talk to other professionals and peers and find out what their experiences and thoughts were. So I think that would be the first thing and then observing through play would be what I would do".

This interchange of ideas with other professionals referred to by Shannan was another common theme that emerged throughout the interviews. This was coupled with the importance of two-way communication with the parents.

> "I would talk to the child's family and pick up on what's happening at home. When we work with children we work as a team, so it's not just a matter of what I think" (Genelle).

And Shannan,

> "I would talk to the parents about what they see the child doing at home, or in other situations that they go to; to find some comparisons, some familiarities and I think after I did my observations, I'd ask somebody else to do a set of observations or developmental summary, so that I would find out if I was missing out on anything; misconceiving something".

This view on the importance of open communication with the child's family as well as with paraprofessionals was again reflected in the attitude expressed with reference to accepting a gifted learning disabled child into an early childhood setting. Although the students unanimously expressed that (in Shannan's words), "they would be happy" to do so, each expressed a certain degree of 'apprehension' and specified certain conditions that they felt may need to be addressed. For example, Shannan felt initially that it would be essential to build up a relationship with the child and the child's family based on trust.

> "I would want to get to know them [the family] and invite the child initially for a day a week so that they could get to know what's happening in the place and get them to trust me".

This attitude was shared by Genelle who said,

> "I would talk with the parents and I would talk with the staff and probably I'd like to have a time when the staff and the parents talk and get to know each other".

Connie's and Julie's reservations were based on the level of support that may be available to them. Each wanted to ensure that they could best meet the needs of the child as well as achieving to their best ability.

> "I would want to make sure that I could cope, so it would depend on the centre and what is available there for special needs children. Basically, I'd just want to make sure that I could provide the best that they [the children] could get, so I would be looking at some sort of support....such as a special needs teacher. I don't think I could give of my best unless I had support from someone else", explained Julie.

This expression of support was also voiced by Connie;

> "If I could work with the family and other specialists, like the professionals, in partnership, I wouldn't hesitate".

The student teachers were also asked to comment on whether or not they felt confident in being able to identify, plan and program for a gifted learning disabled preschooler. A high level of confidence was expressed by five of the students with one student commenting that she felt "a certain degree of confidence" (Julie). Students cited early childhood philosophy as a basis for this confidence. Comments noted were:

> "I feel confident through a plat-based approach; going back to why we believe in observations and looking at the needs and strengths of the child and really involving the family" (Carolyn).

> "Yes, I do [feel confident]. Children are all individuals whether they're gifted learning disabled or non-gifted learning disabled and that's where

> we begin. Every child is planned for on their needs, strengths and interests and we go from there" explained Genelle.
>
> Shannan added, "I think so. I don't think I would focus on the fact that they were gifted or learning disabled.....you need to work at developing them [the child/ren] overall".

An important aspect of program implementation centers on addressing of priorities with regards to experiences developed for the child. It was for this reason that I asked the students to talk about what their priority or focus would be when planning for a gifted learning disabled child. Common themes emerging here included speaking with the child's parents and finding out what their expectations were for their child; the need to address the child's self esteem through planning for the child's strengths and interests; exchanging of information between professionals working with the child and providing the child with choices and decision making with regards to the programming. The feelings/attitudes of the group could be summed up by the statement made by Genelle,

> "One of the things that we should start with is where they [the child] is at, and what they feel good about; what they're interested in. I would start on the positive aspects[of the child] rather then the disability or the difficulty."

Discussion

It is essential that the process of identification and intervention are instigated early in the child's life, as the early years are the most significant in the education of the child. The interviews with the student teachers appear to strongly support the work of Keenan (1994) and Udall (1991) who advocate the use of 'informal' information gatkering procedures, as the initial step in the identification process. The students have coupled this with open communication between parents, teachers and other professionals working with the child. These attitudes echo those held by Udall (1991) who states that "educators of the gifted learning disabled must learn to talk to each other more and work collaboratively (pg. 11).

The student teachers have acknowledged that identification in the early years may be difficult but it is still possible. It would be of interest to see if these views are still held in the teaching months to come. Future studies could follow up on these newly graduated teachers to see how they cope with the challenges that may face them. Certainly, their beliefs are based on good early childhood practices that focus on the overall needs of the child. Appropriately, one should start with identification through observations done in a play-based environment. Planning for the child should focus on the child's interests and strengths. This will assist in building the child's positive self-esteem which will hopefully also assist in the development of the child's needs.

But, if early childhood educationalists are to be successful in this endevour they need to be prepared to work in partnership with the child's parents and with other professionals. Parents of gifted learning disabled children comment that teachers "feel threatened by their first hand knowledge on the subject" (Sherwood, 1995, pg. 6). These barriers to communication need to be broken - ignorance is no excuse. It is time

that *all* professionals working with children learn to address the individualness of the child. We need to see the child before the disability!

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